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Review of *On Turner's Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History* by Wilbur R. Jacobs

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On Turner's Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History. Wilbur R. Jacobs. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. xviii+342 pp. Photographs, index, and bibliographical references. \$35.00 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0616-5).

The addition of another study assessing the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner will surely elicit a few groans among western scholars. This is too

bad, for Wilbur Jacobs' *On Turner's Trail* is a detailed, insightful, and richly rewarding trek that should be undertaken by all western historians.

Jacobs' book mixes the best of biography, historiography, and institutional history, while adding a good deal of personal reminiscence as well. As a biography, Jacobs paints a portrait of an ambitious and complex historian, a man struggling to synthesize a huge quantity of data, who retains a genuinely open mind regarding material and methodology, but who increasingly defends his narrow frontier-sectional thesis in order to make sense of his data and to preserve his place in history. As historiography, Jacobs traces the roots of the frontier-sectional thesis in Turner's childhood and education, follows its development and permutations during Turner's life, reviews the life of the thesis in Turner's students and disciples, especially through Frederick Merk and Ray Allen Billington, and brings the story down to the present day writings of Richard White and William Cronon. One of the most fascinating aspects of the book is Jacobs' recreation of the institutional activities of these historians—course lectures which pass word-for-word from Turner to Merk to Billington, book reviews written to silence opposition to the frontier theory, and political battles waged over Turner's legacy. Also interesting is the publication of responses to a survey regarding Turner from his former students. Readings these not only enhances Turner's legacy, but also promotes self-reflection regarding the historian's double role of researcher and teacher.

Jacobs' treatment of Turner is sympathetic without hiding Turner's warts. The book points to both Turner's accomplishments and failings. For example, regarding Turner's treatment of ethnic groups, Jacobs admits that Turner's notes reveal that he was even more racist than his times. Yet Jacobs also uses Turner's voluminous papers to suggest that Turner was a scholar of vision who anticipated accurately many of the problems that would plague the West and the nation long after his death. Jacobs echoes Richard Hofstadter's characterization of Turner as a "non-writing writer," and shows that Turner's unpublished notes contain many ideas and inquiries that are worth exploring today. At times, however, Jacobs' use of these notes verge on an apology for Turner's failures. Jacob's may also be fairly criticized for his mixed evaluations of the "New West" writings of White, Cronon, and Patricia Nelson Limerick.

Despite this sometimes uneven treatment, Jacobs has crafted an impressive narrative out of abstract, intellectual history. Western scholars will find *On Turner's Trail* an interesting, personal story of historians, their ideas, and the ups, downs, and unexpected turns that reward, punish, and confound

them. Jacobs' study deserves high praise and a wide audience. **Mark A. Eifler**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska at Kearney*.